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THE ROUND TABLE

To the Editor of the "English Journal":

I wonder if you have seen the fable of Bidpai which has come to light still more recently than the one published in your February issue? To me it is even more interesting than that.

Very truly yours,

ROBERT H. FLETCHER

GRINNELL, IOWA,

February 20, 1912

ANOTHER FABLE OF BIDPAI—THE SONG-BIRDS AND THE DOMESTIC FOWLS

There was once an old gentleman who had an extensive estate on which he kept numbers of birds of various kinds. He devoted a good deal of attention to the education of the young birds—had them trained by bird-tutors several hours each morning. While they were still chicks they used to meet all together in a bird school, and the tutors taught them what sorts of food were good for birds, where to look for food, and many other things of a useful nature. The tutors also tried to teach them a second sort of subjects: how to build nests in the trees or the fields, how to fly gracefully, and how to sing. The classes in nutrition and the like got on pretty well (though of course there were plenty of dull chicks of all species); but while the meadow-larks and the other song-birds generally learned the above-ground subjects (so to call them) successfully, the domestic fowls never made any progress in them. When the birds were older, some of them—and these were mostly the song-birds—passed on to other tutors, from whom they continued to learn, or to try to learn, the nesting, flying, singing, and the like. There was not always perfect peace and happiness on the estate, and the domestic fowls had an uneasy feeling that part of their education had been thrown away; but, for the most part, when the birds grew up they went their several ways, and one could always see the hens and the geese contentedly occupying the yard and hear the song-birds as they flew and twittered overhead.

After a while the old gentleman died and his grandchildren inherited his estate. They took to entertaining a great deal and needed many fowls for the purpose; so they largely increased the number of the

domestic contingent. Before long the chickens of these species, seeing themselves so much more numerous in school than the song-birds, decided to stand for their majority rights. They therefore sent a deputation to their owners and made complaint. "Our curriculum," they said, "ought to be made over. None of us can ever learn to sing, and as for being graceful, we don't want to be. What good are such things anyway? Besides, they don't interest us. Those young song-birds have got altogether false ideas about the real values of life. Some of your grandfather's friends used to come around and make poems about them, and they took them seriously. Better clip their wings and set them to being useful with us."

The owners thought the matter over a minute or two and then replied: "You are evidently right. Our grandfather was a ridiculous old fogey. Of course neither you nor anyone else ought to study anything but what is practical and what interests you. Then, too, there is the greatest danger that hard application to anything involving mental effort will irreparably injure your brains." So the owners brought in new tutors who gave the young birds much more minute instruction about how to dig for worms and taught them how to get fatter for the table and how to develop their feathers so that they would be more useful for cushions. They substituted these things for the old nesting-flying-singing subjects, for which they left only a very few minutes at the end of the morning. "If any of the young birds want more of these things," they said, "they can study them later under other teachers."

At all this the song-birds remonstrated. "You have turned the tables too completely," they said. "We thought any normal bird knew by instinct how to peck; it's of no value to us to learn how to get fat; and it's too late for us to begin to learn to fly and sing when we are almost grown up."

The owners, (Here the manuscript breaks off).

THE LABOR OF THEME-READING

Professor E. M. Hopkins' investigation of the conditions of teaching English composition has brought out, among other things, testimony to the effect that theme-reading is among the most nerve-exhausting and brain-exhausting of occupations, one that it is impossible to pursue as long or as steadily as other occupations, without seriously harmful results. Perhaps no one who has had experience will doubt this, and I may add that the personal experience of occasional returns to this kind of work after a considerable intermission has given me an oppor-